

## Introduction

*Making Animal Meaning* explores how humans construct, configure, and constantly negotiate the meaning of other animals in the social world. This meaning-making is not a new human pastime. We have been struggling with the essence of animals for at least 33,000 years—our earliest known surviving artistic endeavours are drawings of lions and rhinoceroses on cave walls in southern France and carvings of birds and horses from mammoth ivory in southwestern Germany. With the onset of writing, the construction of animal meaning took center stage in the first epic poem, *Gilgamesh*, which tells the story of a friendship between a human, King Gilgamesh, and a wild beast-man, Enkidu.

Our attempts to make meaning of animals—to describe their behaviors, depict their unique physical attributes, elucidate their similarities and differences from us, and chronicle our treasured alliances with them—continue unabated to the present day. Contemporary humans still spend much of their time drawing, painting, sketching, and sculpting animal images. We still write their stories and give them central roles in our poetry, fiction, and myths. We are still consumed by the need to mark, unmark, and blur the boundaries between us, creating imaginative human-animal mergers that represent the best, and sometimes the worst, of what it means to be “human” or “animal.” And while we have been busily sorting out the meaning of animals, they have been leaving their own traces and signs—thus actively creating their own meaning. Finally, the vast majority of the recent scholarship on animal meaning has been theoretical, offering a stunning array of arguments about the essentials of the “animal,” but there is a paucity of empirical

research to illustrate the theories of animal essence. This volume begins to fill that gap.

*Making Animal Meaning* is a collection of ten original essays, three that focus on key theoretical underpinnings of animal meaning and seven that illustrate the theoretical concepts in studies of specific cultural spaces and contexts, animal species, and human-animal relations. Covering some of the most exciting themes in the vibrant field of animal studies, these essays represent the best in interdisciplinarity, including voices from anthropology, science studies, geography, American studies, history, critical studies, environmental studies, and women's studies. The chapters also have significant chronological reach, with essays exploring the Renaissance, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and contemporary culture. Together, the chapters reveal animal meanings as they were made in Europe, the United States, Mexico, South Africa, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. A deeply thoughtful and diverse collection, *Making Animal Meaning* ensures the analytical strength of interdisciplinary and international discourse when tackling the age-old quest of animal meaning.

We have divided the book into two sections: Part 1 consists of three essays that explore theoretical underpinnings of animal meaning. At the center of these chapters is the animal—the animal as an author who leaves traces of his or her meaning, the animal as a pest who embodies social tensions and conflicts, and the animal as kin with whom we share the act of consumption. These foundational chapters set the stage for the seven observational essays in Part 2. Together, these chapters demonstrate new understandings of central questions concerning

animal agency, kinship, and consumption. By providing such a forum, *Making Animal Meaning* takes scholars and students into new terrain, reconceptualizing methods for researching animal histories and rethinking the contingency of the human-animal relationship.

In Chapter 1, "Animal Writes: Historiography, Disciplinarity, and the Animal Trace," Etienne Benson examines the very process of writing about animals. Benson argues that writing about animals is not just a human endeavor—the activity of writing is coproduced by the animals in our narratives. He thus questions the human assumption of complete control over how animals are represented, arguing instead that we continually interact with interdependent embodied traces. Most of these traces are nonhuman in origin, and all of them are contingent on one another for the construction of meaning. For example, the hunter and the hunted are bound in a relation of mutual constitution and obligation so that predators are shaped and reshaped by their prey. Benson also offers methods for the historian-hunter who seeks to find animal traces in the archives in which they forage. He argues that new practices and data sets drawn from the sciences and humanities are required "to tell a multivocal, multiperspective story in which the voices and perspectives are not exclusively human." By applying this approach, scholars extend the range of historical actors to include the animals and the traces they create.

All of this means that animals have agency, and this theme is taken up in a number of the essays. For example, Benson's call to move beyond seeing animals merely as part of human histories and instead recognize them as subjects is well

illustrated by Stacy Rule's "Animal Meaning in T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*." Rule's research documents that Eliot's poem does not represent animals in human metaphors, as is commonly argued about his work. She focuses on Eliot's use of three different names for cats to mark their feline individuality—an everyday name, a particular and individual name, and a secret name that is hidden to everyone but the cat itself and one that represents the cat's private self, inaccessible to humans. The third, secret name for cats in Eliot's poetry ensures that the cats about whom he writes exist apart from humans rather than simply being dominated by them. Rule concludes that Eliot's way of writing about the interaction between humans and other animals allows us to reflect on the reality that animals have unique and often unknowable perspectives.

In Benjamin Arbel's essay, "The Renaissance Transformation of Animal Meaning: From Petrarch to Montaigne" our gaze is returned to human perspectives of other animals. Arbel argues that the commonly held assumption that the Renaissance was a time of widespread degradation of animals is unjustified. He finds that Renaissance writers (both leading humanists and others) wrote poems, eulogies, essays, dialogues, and letters that showed a new attitude toward animals that was not present in the Middle Ages. These new attitudes of the Renaissance connected ethical concern with the dynamic distinction between human and animal that pervaded classical culture. The renewed sensitivity toward animals in Renaissance writing shared some common characteristics, including an increased recognition of the individuality of animals, a growing appreciation of animals' mental capacities, and increased moral concern for animals' well-being. By exploring the works of

Plutarch and others, Arbel demonstrates that the change in sensitivity developed from Renaissance humanism, with its focus on ethics and secularism and a rediscovery of classical culture. Like Eliot's poetic discussion of the world of cats, poets from ancient times and the Renaissance creatively used language to capture the complex lives of companion animals. Several of these writings used humor interwoven with deep candid feelings of affection. For example, the humanist Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) wrote a eulogy identifying his dog as a moral being with a clear grasp of the liberal arts.

While Arbel documents evidence of the shifting status of animals in the writings of Renaissance intellectuals, including writings about the passing of their "pets," in her chapter, "Animal Deaths and the Written Record of History: The Politics of Pet Obituaries," Jane Desmond finds similar shifts in the status of companion animals as recorded in contemporary newspaper obituaries. Noting that pet obituaries commemorate a life while ensuring a historical trace of that life in the public record, Desmond finds that these narratives serve as evidence of the enhanced position of the "pet" as a human companion. Because paid obituaries are becoming commonplace, memorializing a treasured companion is now democratized, at least for those with the ability to pay. Paid obits are written by the human family of the deceased pet, not by the newspaper staff, assuring that the obituary makes it into print. Desmond argues that shifting the "boundaries of the includable" is a new phenomenon in obituary writing. The shift is now possible with the declining authority of newspaper editors, who could decide not only if a pet should get an obituary but also whether gay and lesbian partners or unborn children should be

commemorated. The critics of pet obits make clear a social ranking based on value. They argue that memorializing a beloved pet is not only ridiculous and in bad taste but also “feminized as excessively mawkish and emotional.” Some obits, such as those for hamsters, are more easily parodied than those for a golden retriever or a cat who has been with a family for twenty years. And speaking of family, pet obits join single-parent households and families of gays and lesbians in challenging the very concept of “family.” Desmond concludes that pet obits not only highlight a parity between the value of humans and other animals but also could be a harbinger of major shifts in social practices, including a sweeping reorganization of how humans use animals for food, sport, and scientific research.

Sharon Wilcox Adams’s “On the Trail of the Devil Cat: Hunting for the Jaguar in the United States and Mexico” focuses on the use of animals for sport and the complexity of agency, a power that can be gained and lost, in part or entirely, with or without intent. Adams examines the narratives of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century naturalists and hunters to document how the jaguar was encountered and represented. Her research finds that this process of representation left the jaguar removed from its animal-self, taking a new form based on human ideas of “jaguar-ness.” Since the documents she examines were marked by class, prestige, whiteness, and masculinity, Adams warns that the production of the jaguar narratives necessarily reflects silences, including that of the jaguars themselves. One of the most problematic aspects of this complex and contested discourse is the animal’s relative scarcity and absence, which

disproportionately drives certain misconceptions, such as the myth of ferocity that was a popular but unfounded notion for over 100 years.

Unlike the brief intimacy of the hunt, the relationship between a human and his or her assistance dog is an enduring, close, working relationship. Avigdor Edminster extends the significance that Donna Haraway and others attribute to trainers and hunters as bearers of animal traces in his essay, "Interspecies Families, Freelance Dogs, and Personhood: Saved Lives and Being One at an Assistance Dog Agency." Based on observations at a North American assistance dog agency, Edminster finds that the agency's mission to "create relationships" is realized in the enactment and shaping of notions about what humans and dogs can share on multiple levels—physical, emotional, and cognitive. The close bond between clients and assistance dogs allows for a special intimacy between dogs and humans, and their relationships are often understood in terms of family or work (a dog is like a son or daughter, or the dog advertises himself or herself). However, not all human-dog interactions are positively conveyed at the agency. Sometimes dogs are objectified and referred to as inferior to humans (let them know who is boss or bring the dog down like a steer). Edminster discusses assistance dogs who come from kill-shelters as particularly vulnerable in given a last chance to live by proving themselves worthy of assistance work. Indeed, one client who was matched with a shelter survivor felt that she, too, was given a chance to live by the assistance dog. Edminster emphasizes themes of agency, interdependency, relational connections, and personhood. Whether willing or willed, the human-dog

partnerships that Edminster analyzes challenge us to reconsider key notions about the relationship between humans and other animals.

In "Mobility and the Making of Animal Meaning: The Kinetics of 'Vermin' and 'Wildlife' in Southern Africa," Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga reveals the signs of "the animal" in southern Africa. His exploration begins by highlighting the subjective status of the label "human" that is placed upon and removed from (some) of us by others. Mavhunga centers the role of the animal as "first author in its designation as an other" and emphasizes the power of the animal by advocating the expansion of Foucault's notion of biopower. By focusing on mobility across borders between human and animal, civilization and nature, wild and domestic, Mavhunga captures the ephemeral and permeable character of these categorizations. He argues that nature is not only inexorably linked to specific historical contexts but is also marked by good animals (wildlife) and bad animals (vermin). Noting that scholars have neglected the study of vermin or pests, Mavhunga's study of the pests and pathogens of Limpopo, southern Africa, extends animal studies scholarship into the realm of African studies and environmental history, a significant disciplinary intersection.

The analysis of the problem animal or pest and contemporary uses of these categories in racist discourse makes a significant contribution to our understanding of ourselves through the othering of others. This intersection is emphasized in Meisha Rosenberg's "Golden Retrievers Are White, Pit Bulls Are Black, and Chihuahuas Are Hispanic: Representations of Breeds of Dog and Issues of Race in Popular Culture." Rosenberg recognizes the profound role of the media in the

idolizing of some breeds and the demonizing of others, while powerfully portraying how such representations intertwine with racial and socioeconomic prejudice. She argues that certain dog breeds reflect contemporary society's perceptions of and problems with difference. She analyzes how middle-class whiteness is mapped onto golden retrievers, how pit bulls are identified with lower-class African Americans, and how Chihuahuas are stereotyped as Latinos. Rosenberg paints a provocative portrait of the anxieties around purity and pedigree that characterize the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Analysis of such racializing of the animal expands scholarship concerning pedigrees and pets in the nineteenth century while also enriching our understanding of the application of anthropomorphism as we attempt to map meaning, here in the form of stereotyping, onto the bodies of others.

The questions "What is human?" and "What is animal?" and exploration of how these categories have been, and continue to be, patrolled resonate in both Rosenberg's and Mavhunga's work. The relationship between human and animal is also explored in Analía Villagra's "Cannibalism, Consumption, and Kinship in Animal Studies." Villagra addresses the theme of eating animals by conceptualizing consumption as an act of kinship, arguing that such a relationship can be an empowering experience for both the consumer and the consumed. In so doing, she engages with questions of animal agency and the human-as-animal while challenging us to confront a tension that lies at the heart of animal studies: is it possible to reconcile a sense of kinship with other animals with the practice of consuming their bodies? Villagra argues yes, and she introduces the ultimate

villianized human/animal—the cannibal—as a means of reconciling the apparently irreconcilable. By embracing the fluidity that characterizes the status of other animals (at times prey, predator, food, consumer), Villagra argues that eating animal flesh is a process of interspecies kinship. Indeed, our becoming cannibal is not so tragic; on the contrary, it is an opportunity for a new relation with our animal kin.

Questions of kinship and ethical relations explored in Villagra's work are illustrated in Casey R. Riffel's "Animals at the End of the World: Notes toward a Transspecies Eschatology." In a comprehensive analysis of Phillip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Riffel uses apocalyptic time to demonstrate how our understandings of other animals must move beyond history, materiality, and ontology toward new social, ethical, and kin relationships. Riffel's essay is well placed as the final chapter in the volume—a look to the future. The process of looking ahead allows us to encounter animals with new conceptions and ethics, and getting rid of history creates human-animal relationships riddled with complexities anew.

Anxieties accompany these complexities. Both Riffel and Villagra challenge us to face our uneasiness about the meanings humans map onto our kin. Through her discussion of cannibalism, Villagra asks, Why should the sudden personhood of an animal discomfit us so? while Riffel's reading of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* pushes us to break the comfortable confines of ontology. Similarly, Mavhunga and Rosenberg provoke us to recognize the role of the "human" and the "animal" in racial stereotyping, thus highlighting the central place anxiety occupies

in contemporary culture. This anxiety has been an undercurrent in much animal studies scholarship. In contrast, these chapters confront and clarify the origins and meaning of this response to the human-animal relationship.

In many ways, *Making Animal Meaning* ends like it begins, by questioning how animal meaning is made, by whom, and with what consequences. By simultaneously embracing traditional animal studies foci, such as animal agency, identity, and animalization, while contesting the extent to which animals can be revealed as authors of meaning, this volume both contributes to and significantly extends animal studies scholarship. Chapters such as those by Benson, Mavhunga, and Villagra reveal new methods for the scholarly endeavor of discovering animal traces and demonstrate the ways in which interdisciplinary and international perspectives allow for the centering of the animal actor. We see how complex human-animal relationships can be revealed through a broad spectrum of sources, including the historical illustrations and texts of jaguar hunters (Adams) and the contemporary lived relationships between humans and the animals who assist them (Edminster). Ranging from the philosophers of the Renaissance (Arbel) to the poets of the nineteenth century (Rule), to the obituary columns (Desmond) and popular culture of the present (Rosenberg), to a fictional timeless world (Riffel), the chapters eloquently demonstrate the significance of animal meaning for our distant and more recent past, our present, and our future.